

Preparing for Pandemic Influenza



What it is

An influenza pandemic is a worldwide outbreak of a new flu virus

An influenza—or flu—pandemic is an outbreak of a new type of flu virus that spreads rapidly from one country to another. The new virus affects only birds or

animals at first, but gradually changes to affect people as well. A pandemic begins when the new flu virus is easily passed from person to person.

A flu pandemic will be more serious than the seasonal flu

Not as many people get sick from seasonal flu because people have developed some immunity to the virus and because so many protect themselves by getting flu shots. However, a pandemic would be caused by a new type of flu virus. People would have no immunity to it and no vaccine would exist to prevent it.

It would take months to develop and produce a vaccine that works against a new pandemic flu virus. Because of this—and because people would have no immunity—a new flu virus would spread rapidly. Hundreds of thousands in our country could get sick, and many could die.

Flu pandemics happen

Flu viruses are everywhere and they change constantly. At some time in the future it is very likely that a flu virus will change in a way that causes a pandemic. Currently, health officials are concerned about the avian flu virus in Asia and Europe, because it could change and spread easily from person to person. No one knows when the next flu pandemic will happen;

large pandemics occurred in 1918, 1957, and 1968. Far more people travel today than in the past, which makes it easier for diseases to spread quickly around the world. A flu outbreak in another country may be just an airplane ride away from the United States.

What to expect

If an outbreak occurs

No one knows how bad the next flu pandemic will be, but everyone should be prepared for the worst.

- It may be difficult to get medical care. Large numbers of sick people may overwhelm hospitals and clinics. Doctors and nurses will get sick, too, so hospitals and clinics may be short-staffed.
- Supplies and services will be limited. Many people will be unable to work, affecting how long businesses, banks, government offices and other services are open.
- You may be asked to stay away from others. Staying home will help stop the spread of the virus. Events may be canceled, and theaters and schools closed. If necessary, health officials will issue orders to keep people who have the virus separated from others.
- It will take months to develop a vaccine against

the new virus, so flu shots will not be immediately available.

- Medicines for flu symptoms may be in short supply.
- Travel may be difficult. Routes and schedules for buses, trains or planes may change or be restricted. Gasoline may also be in short supply.
- You may be asked to wear a mask. Masks may be required in hospitals, clinics or doctors' offices, as well as other places that are open to the public.
- A flu pandemic could last a long time. The 1918 flu pandemic lasted 18 months. In some cases, pandemics weaken for a while and then recur.
- Health officials will keep you informed. They will work with the media to provide timely information and advice. Web sites from government health agencies will also have updated information.

In your community

Know your neighbors. Talk with family, friends and neighbors to make sure everyone is prepared. Be ready to help neighbors who are elderly or have special needs if services they depend on are not available.

Know school policies. Know policies about illnesses and being absent. Be prepared for school closures. Make a plan for taking care of your children if schools are not open for long periods.

At work

You may not be able to go to work. Staying home from work when you are sick is the most important thing you can do to protect others.

Know policies. Ask your employer or union about sick leave and policies about absences, time off and telecommuting.

Encourage planning. Every business, organization and agency should have a plan for making sure essential work can get done if large numbers of employees are absent over many months. You may

be asked to perform duties that are not typically part of your job.

Explore other ways to get your work done.

When people are ill, find ways to reduce personal contact such as increased use of e-mails or phone conferences.